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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The CIA: Something Sinister?

Today marks the end of my first month as ombudsman. This isn't the first time that I've been in an adversarial relationship with editors and reporters. In government, it was that way all the time. In this capacity, even when I had conclusive proof that a news story was wrong, the reporter's excuse of last resort, once confronted with the facts, was: "Well, you must remember, we news people are only human." As a government official, I always felt this excuse was based on a false premise.

Now that I am an inhabitant of the Post newsroom, I find I like the climate and the people. It is filled with hard-

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working and dedicated men and women who set out each day to report the news as fairly and accurately as possible. In observing them gather the news, I have even detected slight traces of humility, something I'd never sensed before. Considering the deadline pressures, the instant decisions that must be made all through the day, I'm genuinely surprised with the quality and that more errors do not appear in print.

Now, having said that, let me state that there's plenty of room for improvement. My internal critiques have been blunt. I'm not much on grammar, although I love the English language; accuracy, fairness, good taste and content are my main concerns.

For example, I noted that entirely too much space was given to John Hinckley's effort to gain more freedom. Nobody listened. The use of photos that were unfair or unflattering to the subject bothered me. I got nowhere. I took exception to feature stories that told me more than I wanted to know. You've noticed, I'm sure, how brief those articles have become.

The month has not been without some reward. For instance, one of my first internal memos came back from the office of Donald Graham, the publisher of The Post, with this handwritten notation: "I disagree with what you wrote . . . but keep it up. Terrific." The last time a newspaper publisher disagreed with something I wrote, guess which one of us went looking for another job?

In reading The Post with close scrutiny the past few weeks, I was particularly incensed over two stories, one about some members of a Hasidic order, the other about the CIA. Both stories used language and innuendo unjustly. Let me deal with the offending story about the CIA. (The Hasidic article was effectively dealt with in a letter to the editor Saturday.)

The dateline was Oman, a tiny sultanate so strategically situated in the Middle East that you don't have to have a Ph.D. in geopolitics to sense its vital importance to the free world.

The Post correspondent wrote of one James H. Critchfield of Arlington, Va., who is president of a company doing business in Oman. Mr. Critchfield is a former CIA official, and the correspondent referred to him in a way that made it seem as though he'd unearthed the dark side of his life, the implication being that there was something sinister about an ex-CIA employee running a business in Oman.

Mr. Critchfield, who was phoned at his Arlington number by The Post, "confirmed" his previous association with the CIA, which was already known to The Post and practically everybody else. It may come as a surprise to some reporters and editors that many CIA operatives were and are fine, upstanding, patriotic Americans who, naive as it may seem, really and truly believe they serve their country honorably.

I haven't seen a person indicted by the use of language this way since a newspaper in a Republican stronghold reported that "The witness admitted under cross-examination that he had once been a member of the Democratic Party."

It is difficult to say at the moment how often this column will appear. So far, most of my time and energy has been spent on internal memos. I function better that way, even in government. Others were whistle-blowers; I fought my battles in the back room.

But I may avail myself of this space when I feel it necessary to help facilitate communications. It is a little trick you learn in government. When you aren't getting through to your colleagues in the Cabinet or to the president himself, the most effective way to get their attention is through the pages of The Post.